

## interview

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Neda Agha-Soltan's Mother in Interview with Rooz:

# Neda's Open Eyes Drove Me Mad



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Hajar Rostami-Motlagh, Neda Agha-Soltan's mother, told Rooz in an interview that her daughter's open eyes have driven her mad.

According to the Time magazine, the moment of Neda Agha-Soltan's death during the Iranian people's protest against the election coup "turned into probably the most widely witnessed death in human history." Speaking to Rooz, Hajar Rostami-Motlagh speaks for the first time about her reaction after the video of her daughter's death.

**Rooz: Ms. Rostami, how did you watch the video of Neda's death? Can you tell us about the video...**

Hajar Rostami-Motlagh (Rostami-Motlagh): I had asked Mr. Panahi many times about what Neda said in her final moments and what happened. But I didn't have the courage to watch the film. Mr. Panahi said, "We left the protests and were walking toward the car to come home when suddenly we heard a shot. Neda didn't believe that the bullet had hit her at first. She bent over, looked and realized what had happened. She fell. She just said, 'Mr. Panahi, I'm burning.'" I had asked Mr. Panahi many times and he would describe it for me. But I didn't see the video until 8 months later. I didn't have the courage to. One day, when I was alone, I found the courage and watched it. I felt so sick; I can't describe it. Neda's open eyes drove me mad. When someone dies, her eyes close, but my Neda's eyes remained open. I am certain that they won't close until she achieves her goal. I watched the video in full just that one time. I haven't been able to watch it again. It's all over the place, on satellite networks, on the Internet. But I try not to watch it. Neda's open eyes, the blood she coughed up, her last moments and her cry of 'I'm burning' are constantly with me. They disturb me, everywhere and all the time. They destroy me from the

inside. Neda's eyes disturb me a lot. Her eyes were searching for the "why" of her life and the "why" of her death...



**Rooz: You said Neda's eyes won't close until she achieves her goal. What was Neda's goal?**

Rostami-Motlagh: Neda wanted freedom. As a woman, she wanted social and freedoms and a life worthy of a human being. She always said, "Men and women are no different. They are equal, but why don't they have equal rights in Iran? What is the difference between men and women? Why should I have to wear mandatory Hejab because I am a woman and be discriminated against?" Neda was a philosophy student. Chador [full-length black robe worn by Muslim women] was mandatory at her university. Neda couldn't accept that. She always asked why should she wear chador in an environment where only women are present. She studied for three terms and then withdrew. She asked, why should I be worried when I go out not to get in trouble because of what I'm wearing? Why should I be afraid of the police when I go to a party?

Neda's biggest worry was gender inequality. She wanted freedom. She joined her countrymen and women after the election to demand her vote. She wanted her rights, even though she hadn't been able to vote.

**Rooz: Why didn't Neda vote? Had she boycotted the election like some claim?**

Rostami-Motlagh: No. Neda wanted freedom and change. I was away from Tehran when I voted and returned the day after the election. Neda was upset that day. She called and said that she had gone to several polling stations to vote but hadn't been able to. She explained that Mr. Mousavi's representatives weren't present at any of the stations. When Neda investigates and asks to see Mr. Mousavi's representative, they tell her, Mr. Ahmadinejad's representative is here, come and vote. She got upset and asked how is it possible for a polling station not to have representatives from any candidates other than Ahmadinejad. Because of that she didn't vote.



**Rooz: Other than June 20, did you accompany Neda to any of the protests? Did you even imagine events like that?**

Rostami-Motlagh: The atmosphere before the election was very beautiful. I had never seen such passion and determination in my life. My family and I participated in the 1979 protests, but he had never seen anything like what we saw [last year]. We absolutely couldn't have imagined it. During the 1979 protests, we were always at the front line, but we didn't receive even a scratch. Nowhere in the world women are shot directly. A delegation from the Red Crescent came to console me but I didn't let them inside the house. I said nowhere in the world they do something like that. At most they shoot at the knee; not at the heart or the chest.

**Rooz: You filed a complaint asking for Neda's murdered to be identified. What is the status of that?**

Rostami-Motlagh: I filed a complaint. I want them to identify Neda's murderer so I can look into his eyes and ask, why did you shoot? How did you shoot? How do you feel and what did you get out of it? But my complaint isn't going anywhere, and no one is taking responsibility. I am a citizen of this country too. I have the legal right to know who has killed Neda and who ordered her killing. They only created a folder with the death certificate from the coroner's office, which states that she died from a bullet wound, but nothing else has been done.

**Rooz: Apparently the asked you to accept "dia" [blood money] and abandon the issue.**

Rostami-Motlagh: They didn't have the courage to say it to me directly. I announced before that I don't want dia and I'm not going to ask for retaliation. Just tell me who fired the shot and who ordered it. I want to look into their eyes and ask, why? One time Mr. Shahriari, a criminal court judge, told me that some families have accepted dia. I said I don't want dia. Dia is public money and it is haraam [forbidden in Islam] for the public money to come into my house for dia. But I have to explain something. They try to pretend that we or other families received dia. That's a lie. Except for one family, neither our family nor any other accepted dia and we are not willing to do it either. I will follow up on my complaint until the day I die. I will never back down. I will go wherever necessary. If I don't succeed in Iran I will go to the United Nations.... One day they have to tell me who killed Neda. The burial lot we got for Neda has two spots. Sometimes I say I should be there in the grave near my child. But I will stay until I find my child's murderer. What did our children want? What did they want other than their legal rights? Whenever I asked Neda not to go she said, didn't you go yourself in 1979? Now it's our turn to go for our country's freedom and our rights. Are bullets the answer to that? What did they do with my child's clothes?



**Rooz: They didn't give you Neda's clothes?**

Rostami-Motlagh: In the beginning we were in shock. But two weeks later I went to the Shariati hospital looking for Neda's clothes. They said they are not there. I asked, is that possible? At least give me her bloody shoes and pants. Finally they said Neda's clothes have been destroyed, perhaps burnt... I was extremely upset. I remembered the first day at the hospital, when a young man took Neda's bloody scarf. I beg him, whoever he is, to return my Neda's scarf to me. That scarf has Neda's scent. It is the only thing remaining from my child other than the pictures and videos of her death. Give me that scarf so I can get new energy from my child's scent.

**Rooz: I want to go back, to June 20. What happened that day?**

Rostami-Motlagh: On June 15, I went to the protests with Neda and Mr. Panahi. In an alley off of Gandhi street plain clothes agents chased us. We returned home in our car but Neda was very shaken. She was very disturbed because they had killed several people on June 15. She had changed 180 degrees. On Friday night, the night before her martyrdom, she suddenly woke up and said she had a terrible nightmare. She said, "I had a nightmare that I was on the battlefield and fighting till the morning." On Saturday, around 3 pm she got dressed to go. I begged her not to go because they had orders to shoot. She said, "I'm no different than other young people. They all have fathers and mothers too." I said I can't run because of my surgery and asked her not to go either. She said, "If something happens to you I wouldn't be able to tolerate it, but maybe you can tolerate it if I die." I asked Mohammad and Hoda (Neda's brother and sister) and her friends to make her change her mind. We kept telling her that it was very dangerous to go out that day, but she wouldn't accept it. She left and didn't know what would happen. We never imagined it either. I was worried because of her nightmare. I called her cell phone. She said they have so many forces that it makes a person freak out. I asked, what are they doing? She said, "You think they are caressing us?" I called again, she said, "They fired tear gas and we're inside a laboratory. We put cigarettes on but our eyes are burning so much."



**Rooz: How did you find out about Neda's death?**

Rostami-Motlagh: The last time I talked to her she called me from Mr. Panahi's cell phone. She said they are walking toward the car to return home. Fifteen minutes later Mr. Panahi called and said Neda is shot in the foot and is at the Shariati hospital. I called Hoda and left the house. One of the neighbors came with me. On the way to the hospital, I was looking outside. It looked like a battlefield. We arrived at the hospital. We saw Mohammad is like a statue and Hoda is crying. There were a lot of dead and injured people. I just remember that a young man was carrying Neda's bloody scarf. I didn't see when he left with the scarf. I was looking for Neda. Mr. Panahi's clothes were bloody from the top to the bottom. He said Neda was shot in the shoulder. I said, I'm not a child; tell me what happened to my Neda. Mr. Panahi started crying. I went mad. I was screaming and insulting; insulting God. I said, God, I'm insulting you not the officials, because you won't do anything to your subject. I ran toward the emergency room. Mr. Alizadeh from the hospital security came and said, you're the mother, say whatever you want. I said, I want to see Neda. He said, they are performing surgery to take the bullet out. I thought Neda was wounded. I couldn't even imagine that she had died. I saw that Hoda's husband called and his brothers came too. It didn't even occur to me why they are coming but Reza (Hoda's husband) was pale like a dead person. They had fired tear gas in the hospital yard too. We were inside. They took him away for a few minutes. When he came back he said to Hoda, take your mother home. When I asked he quietly said, I'm sorry. I didn't realize what happened next. I screamed like mad people, "They killed my Neda..."

**Rooz: You buried Neda's body one day after her martyrdom. Did you have problems getting the body back?**

Rostami-Motlagh: The hospital security staff was very helpful. I think they had seen Neda's martyrdom video on the Internet. At 3 am the Shariati hospital security called Hoda's husband and said the body was at the Kahrizak coroner's office. They we heard that they want compensation for the bullet that killed Neda to return her body. Neda's father and cousin and Hoda's husband and some friends went to get the body and took money with them. At 1:30 pm they called and said, there is no problem, they didn't take the money and returned the body. We buried the body and held a funeral at Hoda's house.



**Rooz: How was Neda's body when you received it?**

Rostami-Motlagh: There was a bullet wound on the right hand side of her chest. Her back was ok, the bullet didn't exit from the back, but they had taken it out.

**Rooz: You faced a lot of problems in holding Neda's funeral, seventh and fortieth days of mourning. Can you tell us about that?**

Rostami-Motlagh: The day we buried Neda several guardsmen and officers on motorcycles were stationed on our street, constantly taking pictures and videos. We didn't hold any mourning sessions and stayed him. They didn't say anything to us directly, but they had prohibited the mosques from holding funerals for the martyrs.

**Rooz: On Neda's fortieth day of mourning, I remember you went to a park by yourself and lit a candle, while a lot of people including Mir-Hossein Mousavi gathered around Neda's grave.**

Rostami-Motlagh: On the fortieth, security police came and told us not to hold a gathering. I said people would go to Neda's grave whether I go or not, they won't wait for me. They said, don't go, and I said, ok, I won't go because of the people. Then I heard there were clashes at Neda's grave. I couldn't tolerate it. I went to a park near Hoda's house and lit a candle and started crying. I went to her grave the next day.

**Rooz: Then you went to the spot were Neda was killed.**

Rostami-Motlagh: Yes, I went there and lit a candle. People came too but the security police broke it up. They didn't allow us to sit and asked us to leave the area. Every once in a while I go there, get on my knees and kiss the area where Neda fell. I light a candle and leave flowers. When Neda was dying, somebody had dipped his hand into her blood and left a mark on the wall. I used to go and look at my daughter's blood, the last remaining thing from her. They sprayed red paint over that and my Neda's blood isn't there anymore either. I went there during Norooz too, but try to not go as often, because people come and sit with me, then the police come and clashes begin. I don't want anyone to get in trouble and end up in prison because of Neda. Sometimes I go there at midnight...



**Rooz: On the last Friday night of the year also they prevented people from gathering around Neda's grave, correct?**

Rostami-Motlagh: That day they had a lot of forces there. They always do it, their forces are constantly guarding the area. The next day they had put a black cloth over Neda's grave and prevented people from gathering there. They asked people why they were acting as if Neda was a holy figure...

**Rooz: During this time they damaged Neda's headstone several times; some even said that a bullet was fired into the picture of Neda engraved into the headstone; is that true?**

Rostami-Motlagh: The Behesht Zahra cemetery has small headstones. We hadn't yet put in Neda's main headstone. Three months after Neda's martyrdom one of the friends called and told my sister that some of the headstones were damaged and told her to ask me not to go to Behesht Zahra. She didn't say that Neda's headstone was crushed. I went there. It was full of officers. I wasn't feeling well. I was looking for Neda's grave. Imagine if you lost your child's grave. I was about to have a heart attack. I kept screaming, where is Neda's grave? I bent over and saw that I was above Neda's grave, but they had crushed Neda's headstone and taken it away. There was only a number, 32. I screamed and said, you killed Neda, why are you breaking her headstone? A police officer came to console me. I said, is Behesht Zahra so bad that no one is taking responsibility? He said, we don't know who broke the headstone but we will replace it tomorrow. They replaced it but they broke the new one too. In Azar we put in Neda's main headstone, which remained intact for 12 days. They hadn't fired a shot but they had used an ax to chip away the engraving of Neda's face. The police came again to say that they will replace the headstone. I

refused and said let the same time stay. I'm not changing it. Let them do whatever they want to do. They can take the headstone. Neda is in people's hearts. I wrote nothing on Neda's headstone. No martyr, nothing else. I only wrote Neda Agha-Soltan, and that says everything. That name says everything.

**Rooz: Ms. Rostami, Neda's father, brother and sister have also seen the video of her death, as well as the different pictures, clips and music videos that were made to commemorate Neda. Can you tell us about the atmosphere of your life?**

Rostami-Motlagh: Neda's father is like me. Suddenly his eyes get red and tears begin pouring. Watching the video broke us all. It is very difficult. No one can imagine how deadening it is to see the moment of death of a loved one. Hoda watched the movie early on. Mohammad too. But they try to help me by pouring their sorrow inside. They don't show it. They don't cry in front of me. When we miss Neda, they watch the video of her death. When Mohammad misses her, he goes to her piano. Mohammad plays sitar and violin. Neda sometimes practiced singing with Mr. Panahi. She had picked out a piano to buy. She had even prepared the place in our house where she wanted to put the piano. When she was martyred Mohammad bought the piano and put it exactly where Ned wanted it. What you are hearing now is the sound of that same piano, which Mohammad finds a refuge in. Hoda constantly talks to me and asks me to think about the positives, that people love Neda, that she is the symbol of our freedom now.... But I am a mother. I miss her. I want her to call me and say: "Mom." She had beautiful smiles. I want her to smile. To come in through the door and say, "Mom, what do we have for dinner?" I wait for that voice. I sit and ask God, God please give Neda's murderer the longest life, but don't let him see peace until he lives. My Neda was burning for a moment but I'm burning for the rest of my life. Our life has turned upside down. Neda's father and I show it but Hoda and Mohammad don't.... We all feel that Neda is present, just not physically. She lives with us. Tuesday was my birthday. Every year Neda took me to a restaurant. This year, Hoda took me to the same restaurant. I was so disturbed, I still can't believe it. At night, Hoda had seen Neda in her dream. She had brought me a present and said, Neda is present everywhere, she is with us...



**Rooz: Ms. Rostami, I know this was very difficult for you. I'm sorry that you had to review this all over again. If you have anything else you want to say, please do.**

Rostami-Motlagh: No, these things are a part of our lives; an inseparable part, always with us. I want to thank all the people, for their help, their condolences, their emotional assistance. I thank the art community. I thank my fellow countrymen and women, who have been with me, every step of the way, for the past ten months. I don't know what to do, how to respond to all of their love and support. I thank my countrymen and women outside Iran, and people all over the world for not leaving us alone. I thank the person who painted Neda's last look. That painting and her look disturbed me very much. I thank the mayor of Milan for planting a tree in Neda's memory. I thank everyone who sang for Neda. Two works really influenced me: the one that says, "Freedom needs blood and Neda gave blood for freedom," and the other that said, "Neda, don't be afraid, stay..." All of these give us hope and pride, and I am proud that Neda left for freedom. I am proud that Neda's martyrdom is the symbol of freedom. It is extremely painful; especially now, in the

spring. Neda was in love with the spring. When I go outside, I suddenly start crying, and people look at me... I just say, God, please give patience to mothers; please heal the pain of mothers of prisoners; the pain of mothers of executed children...

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